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*The Inadvertencies and Indiscretions
of good men, a great cause of ge-
neral corruption in Society.*

A
S E R M O N

PREACHED at
ENFIELD in MIDDLESEX,
JANUARY 7, 1746-7.

Being the Day appointed by his Majesty for
the Observation of a GENERAL FAST.

BY
WILLIAM BUSH.

L O N D O N:

Printed for R. HETT, at the *Bible and Crown* in the
Poultry; J. NOON, at the *White Hart* in *Cheapside*;
J. WAUGH, at the *Turk's Head* in *Gracechurch-
Street*; and J. HIGHMORE, under the *Royal-
Exchange*. MDCCXLVII.





TO THE
CONGREGATION
OF
PROTESTANT DISSENTERS
IN
ENFIELD.

My worthy Friends.



THE subject of the
ensuing Discourse
being somewhat pe-
culiar, and yet of
great and extensive impor-
tance, I was willing you should
have the advantage of a more

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DEDICATION.

attentive and deliberate examination of it, than what the bare hearing it would admit of. And accordingly I recommend it, in this manner, to your common and very serious perusal. And I do it with greater satisfaction, not only as I am persuaded the design of it is agreeable to your most pious wishes, but as the foundation it proceeds upon corresponds so well with your prevailing sentiments and principles.

I shall rejoice, if by the blessing of God, the serious review of it may assist towards rendering your respective

DEDICATION.

tive influence in the world, in it's measure, still more extensively beneficial; and particularly in promoting the good work of reformation, so much needed; and in adding daily strength to the interests of religion and virtue. And since it is now, in a manner *unavoidably*, brought under publick view, I am not wholly without hopes but that it may prove of more general use. Possibly it may be a means of quickening the attention of many other persons to some things, which though before overlook'd, they may upon reflection find worthy of their most serious regards, and which,

DEDICATION.

which, if faithfully pursued, may render their christian character more consistent, and their lives more solidly useful in society.

It would be too late for me to offer an apology to you, for the *freedom* I have used on this subject, seeing it is what you have been, for so many years, accustomed to upon most others. And I think it will not be displeasing to any, who value their best improvement, the advancement of religion, and the good of the world, before their own ways and humours.

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All the favour I have to ask for this plain Discourse, (next to an excuse for the length of it, which is indeed more than double what is usual, and which the occasion and nature of the subject must justify) is that it may be read and seriously weighed. By which I mean, that it may not be look'd into meerly to gratify an useles curiosity, and then thrown by without further thought, as is commonly done by occasional Sermons; but that the matter of it may be regarded, agreeable to its importance; and the particulars contained in it applied, where necessary, as useful hints

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hints for the direction of future life.

Wishing You and all Christians the more plentiful communications of divine wisdom, and an increasing zeal for God and his glory, I remain with great respect,

Your faithful Friend,

and obliged Servant,

W. BUSH.



*The Inadvertencies and Indiscretions of
good men, a great cause of general
corruption in Society.*

1 Tim. Chap. v. and Part of the 22^d Verse.
—*Neither be partaker of other mens sins.*



WE have been frequently summoned by Publick Authority, to join in these becoming acts of National Piety, during the progress and different aspects of the present War; and each occasion has had its particular event of importance in view, which properly called for so general and united an application to the great God. But upon some accounts *this* may be considered as more *serious*, more *solemn*, and *affecting*, than any we have hitherto been engaged in. We are at length drawing near to an event, which will probably prove the crisis of that long and unhappy contention, into which we have been unavoidably drawn by the enemies of our Peace and Liberty; an event, on the issue of which this great point will most likely be decided—Whether we are to accept of peace on the hard terms, which a conquering, insulting, enemy shall prescribe, or maintain our freedom,

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and dignity, as *Britons*; or, in other words, whether we shall any longer live a free, and independent people, enjoying our Religion and Properties, under the mild and fatherly government of the best of *Kings*, or hold them at the will and under the encroaching restraints of a foreign *Tyrant*. With such a prospect before us we may well lift up our eyes towards God, and earnestly seek *his* favour, on whose secret blessing, victory and success depend.

In this situation the apparent equity and goodness of the cause we are engaged in, no less than that of vindicating the Liberties of mankind, might naturally inspire us with encouraging hopes, and from thence we might strengthen our faith in the righteousness, power, and mercy of God. But there is another consideration to be brought into the account, which suggests suspicion and dread, rather than confidence and hope, I mean our *Deserts*. That they are to be attended to by us, that they will be regarded of God, and influence his dealings with us, cannot be questioned. For, though a cause be good, and may finally prevail, yet they, in whose hands it is intrusted, may in the mean time be severely punished and brought low for their own sins; so the divine conduct in many instances, both in former and later ages, has shewn us. And surely, if we look into ourselves, we must acknowledge that a scene very dark and discouraging rises up in view.

The particulars of our Ingratitude, Impieties, and growing Corruptions have often, on these occasions, been laid open to us; and would to God, there was not *still* such ample room for a copious enlargement on this melancholy subject. It is from hence our fears spring; it is

is owing to the continuance of our grievous Provocations, that, when we *consider God*, we are yet *afraid of him*, and our *flesh trembleth for fear of his Judgments*.

To remove or lessen this great evil, is the proper end of Fasting and Humiliation ; and so we have been oftentimes seasonably admonished in Publick on these returning Solemnities. But *how* is this to be done? *How* or *where* is it to be expected that the good work of Reformation should begin and be set forward? What are the secret springs that must be set on work, in order to accomplish such a change, as shall brighten up our hopes, and give us any well-grounded confidence in God? It is not to be expected meerly from general declamations upon the degeneracy of the times, or from general admonitions only ; nor are we to look for the *beginings* of it from those amongst whom Reformation is indeed most visibly wanting. If they are amended, it must be by the influence and example of those who are more thoughtful and wise, and of better principles and dispositions than themselves. When a *Torrent* of wickedness rises high, and becomes formidable, it is to little purpose to declaim upon its danger, or to inveigh against those, who immediately and openly countenance it ; to abate its power and assuage its violence, the proper method to be taken, is either to *purify*, or *turn off* those secret and hidden springs whereby it has been fed, and raised to this dangerous height. We may *then* hope, that the stream will gradually clear itself, or decline and waste away ; otherwise all attempts to stop it, though applied with never so much zeal and diligence, will be unavailable ; it will still rage and threaten destruction.

Now, if we trace up the National Irreligion to its various *Fountains*, perhaps we shall find none of more pernicious influence, none which has contributed more largely to the increase of it, than what has flowed from a quarter, whence it would be least suspected to come. *Judgment* often *begins at the House of God*, and the *cause* of Judgments upon the rest of the world, frequently rises from thence too. It is seldom that National Irreligion increases to an *unusual* degree, but when it has received strength from some particular Corruptions, Neglects, or culpable Indiscretions amongst the *better sort* of men. Perhaps this has been the case with us. Vice and Impiety have therefore kept their obstinate hold, because they have really received a secret accession of strength from those, who are professedly their avowed enemies.

This is certainly a matter deserving of most serious enquiry; for if it should be found, that the growing degeneracy of the Age is, in a considerable degree, owing to some such cause, it is to be hoped, that good men will find it more in their power to remove this great evil, than they imagined; and their *Disposition* to do it cannot be questioned.

That I might speak the more usefully upon this subject, I have chosen this weighty admonition of the Apostle, as having an immediate and particular reference to it, *Neither be partaker of other mens sins*. In the improvement of it to this purpose, I shall,

- I. *Explain its proper import and meaning, and shew you in general, in what manner the observance or neglect of it must affect the state of Religion in any Christian Society.*

II. *I*

II. *I shall take notice of some particular instances, wherein it seems to have been neglected by many Christians of worth and character amongst us, and lay open the evil effects of those mistakes and omissions, in which that neglect has been discovered.*

III. *I shall set before you the many and weighty Considerations, which should engage us to the more faithful observance of this important rule of conduct.*

I. *To explain the importance, and meaning of the words.* The admonition or caution itself was delivered (as the passage shews us) to a particular person, and concerning a matter peculiar to the Ministerial Office; but it was in the view we are now considering it, as a rule of extensive consequence to the esteem and progress of Religion in the world. It is subjoined to a precedent caution, in order to shew the weight and importance of it, which was, That he should *lay hands suddenly on no man*. By the imposition of hands persons were readmitted to the communion of the Church, in token of the absolution from those offences, for which they had been formerly excluded from thence. And by the same rite were others ordained to the Office of the Ministry; it being an outward sign, which God was pleased to accompany with the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost. It was (as it still is) of considerable consequence to the interest of Religion, that none should be admitted to either in a *hasty* manner, and without proper evidence of their fitness for what they were entering upon. By a too easy or undistinguishing admission to the communion of the faithful, bad men might be emboldened to gross impiety, and the Church in danger

danger of falling under great reproach from unbelievers. And by a hasty Ordination to the Ministry many might be encouraged to enter upon that important work, who had neither abilities to support the usefulness or dignity of it, nor perhaps a character to recommend the doctrines, or enforce the duties, they inculcated upon others. The Apostle therefore subjoins this additional caution, *Neither be partaker of other mens sins*; intimating, that by a precipitate conduct in this particular, *Timothy* (whose station in the Church must often engage him in the work of Ordination) might possibly *encourage sin* in others; and that, in consequence of such indiscretion, he might unwarily involve himself, not only in their guilt with whom he was immediately concerned, but in the guilt of multitudes besides, that might be offended at the Gospel, through the bad behaviour of persons, who had been so unduly countenanced by him.

Strictly speaking, sin, and guilt which results from it, (in the ordinary course of things) are, and can be *personal* only; the sin of another therefore can no otherwise defile us, nor can we otherwise partake of it's guilt, than as we either join in it, or are accessary to it, or might have, by an obvious precaution, hindered and prevented it. And even in that case, 'tis not so properly his sin, as our *own*, that defiles us; that is, something faultily done, or omitted by us, which, upon enquiry, shall appear to be owing either to some defect in piety, to irreligious carelessness, or some presumptuous humour in ourselves.

It is a sin in any person to offer himself to the communion of the Church, who is conscious of being grossly ignorant in the things of Religion, and that his character is really vicious. And that Minister of Religion shares in the sin of such a
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one, not who omits *unscriptural* terms of communion, or to make enquiries, which no man, or Church have any right to make, but, who through irreligious negligence, admits and receives him as a *good* man, whom an easy, just, and natural enquiry, would have shewn to be a *bad* one. In like manner, it is doubtless a sin in any person to urge himself upon the Office of the Ministry, who is conscious of being a real stranger to the grace of God, whose views are meerly those of ambition, wealth, or power, and whose chief qualifications, instead of sound knowledge and good morals, are visibly empty conceit and a violent attachment to some worldly faction in Religion; and certainly they largely share in the guilt of such an one, who hastily ordain him to that important Office; they sin against the Church of Christ; indeed against the good of mankind in general, by sending out a person to preach the Gospel and to promote Religion in the world, who in all views of probability must prove rather a discouragement and reproach, than a support and honour to it.

The rule may be applied, and will hold equally good in common instances, and in the ordinary measures and conduct of Christians. Every one has a sphere of influence agreeable to his respective station. There are those, whose spirit and manners will be unavoidably affected by his, and who will receive impressions, either favourable to Religion or otherwise, from him. And if his conduct be such as *naturally* tends to enfeeble the power of religious obligations, and to take off the restraints from licentiousness, profaneness, and criminal folly, he undoubtedly becomes a *partaker of their sins*, who are emboldened to the commission of them by such means. We

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do not suppose that this is done with design, or that such a person actually joins with others in their vices, so that he cannot in the highest sense be pronounced guilty, but he must be considered as so far involved in their guilt, as, either through his irresolution or negligence, they were left unadmonished, and unrestrained in the measures of iniquity, or, through his indiscretions, were encouraged to run into them. The bad influence, which such remissness or imprudence has upon society, will always be in proportion to the degree in which it is indulged by persons of character in the profession of Religion. And in what measure it has appeared amongst such, in their ordinary behaviour in life, and consequently, how much the prevalent Irreligion of the Nation is owing to this cause, they will best judge, who have most carefully observed the spirit and manners of the generality of Christians ;—'tis to be feared, *not a little*.

The importance of this caution, is then to be determined, you see, like that of all others, by the natural effects of observing or neglecting it ; and these are such as have a most extensive influence upon the state of Religion in the world. While good men preserve the prudence and purity of their own character as *consistent* Christians, they will, notwithstanding the weaknesses incident to them as men, strike a very powerful awe, and be a restraint upon the licentiousness of those around them ; and the natural excellence of their example and manners will not fail, in some measure, to diffuse a spirit of Religion through the times in which they live. Consequently, where corruptions have grown to such an height in any society, as to have drawn down visible tokens of divine displeasure, the best remedy of this evil,

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is a better spirit, more wisdom and piety; in other words, a *Reformation* amongst those, whose more consistent conduct might have originally prevented it. On the other hand, it is as evident, that if they, who are *the salt of the earth*, lose *their savour* and seasoning, a general corruption of manners must follow upon it. If they, who are the *light of the world*, cease to diffuse their lustre, no wonder the world around them sinks proportionably into the darkness of vice and profaneness. And in this case the publick degeneracy must of necessity rise still higher, and spread itself still wider, as it really receives encouragement from that quarter, from whence should have come it's greatest check and restraint.

What reason there is to suspect this to have been one great cause of that prevalent Irreligion amongst ourselves, of which we complain, and from which we fear so much, and consequently what need there is of a more diligent attention to this excellent rule, will appear from what I proposed, which was,

II. *To take notice of some particular instances, wherein it seems to have been neglected by many Christians of worth and character amongst us; and to lay open the evil effects of such an unhappy omission.*

And here it might perhaps be interpreted as an evidence of partiality in me, should I *wholly* omit to take notice, how much the state of Religion amongst us may have suffered by the neglect of this caution in that important concern, on account of which it was originally given by the *Apostle*, viz. The regulation of the Gospel Ministry. But this is a subject, which every one must judge of according to his own observations; and which it much better becomes those, who bear

rule in the heritage of God, to think of, than me to enlarge upon. Doubtless, persons in such a station must be fully apprized of how great importance to the power of Religion in any Christian Nation a *well-instructed, pious, exemplary Ministry* is; and that they are but ill fitted to take care of the souls of *others*, who live as if they had none of their *own*.——Certainly, vital godliness is not likely to flourish much in those places, where they, who should be it's brightest patterns, discover but too visibly a contempt of it in their ordinary conversation; on the contrary, nothing can be expected but that it should dwindle and pine away under the most fatal discouragements. It cannot be supposed, but that observations of this sort should lie open to those who have *the oversight of the flock of God amongst us*; and that with every instructive intimation, as well as to other men. And accordingly it may be presumed, that the visible, extensive mischiefs that must accrue to the Church of Christ by *laying hands suddenly on any man*, will prevent their becoming *partakers of other mens sins*, by doing it.

But the instances wherein a neglect of this Apostolical Admonition hath appeared amongst good men in the more *common* scenes of life, are what I am particularly to take notice of; and in what manner they have contributed to the National Irreligion. And that which deserves notice in the *first* place as a leading step to many others is,

1. *A vain affectation of refining the Christian Doctrine, under the notion of rendering it still more rational and perfect.* Without question it must be confessed to have been a great advantage to the glory of our Religion, that, during the many close enquiries which have been lately made into it's evidence,

evidence, at the same time all objections to the truth of it have been fairly answered, it's Doctrine has been happily purified from many corrupt additions. And, as, by this nearer examination, it has been fully discovered, that these, though artfully engrafted upon it, were really no part of it, so the *genuine Gospel of Christ* has appeared in brighter lustre upon their being rejected out of it. It has appeared in all it's parts, and in every view, correspondent to the perfections of God, and agreeable to the most improved Reason of men. But, with many persons, all this has ended very differently from what might have been expected. Instead of Unbelievers coming over to Christianity, many Christians have shewn too great a disposition to go, as fast as possible, into the scheme of Infidelity; and to render this the more easie, many attempts have been made to bring down the Gospel meerly to the standard of Natural Religion; and this shall be styled rendering it more pure and perfect. As if the proper method of doing honour to a Revelation, which was intended as an improvement upon Natural Religion, and to strengthen its engagements by many additional helps and discoveries, was to reject every thing peculiar to it, and to give men to understand, that it contained nothing more than what they did or *might* know before it was given.

From hence many Christians, and those otherwise not the least rational and considerate, seem to have been induced to give up with ease some of the most distinguishing Doctrines of Christianity. Why else are the great and interesting truths of the Sacrifice of Christ's Death, as an Atonement for Sin; of his continual Mediation and Priesthood; of the assistance of the Divine Spirit

to the purposes of holiness; and of a particular Providence; either totally discarded by many, or solved away into meer *Figure* or *Metaphor*? Is it that they are not *plainly expressed* in the New Testament? Quite otherwise. They are things so far from being drawn from doubtful interpretations of obscure passages, that they lie full in sight before us, upon looking into the Gospel. Surely there should be more care used, that while we are *burning up the tares*, we *destroy not with them the wheat also*.

Unjustifiable as this is, it is to be suspected, that some good minds have been drawn into it, from a generous and worthy, but ill-conducted design, of rendering the Christian Scheme more *palatable* to the taste of Unbelievers. But will it render it more *credible*? One would think not. One would rather imagine, that when the professed friends of Revelation give up many of its distinguishing Doctrines, as indefensible, this would be so far from recommending the rest as *true*, that it would rather furnish them with a good argument for rejecting the whole (considered under the notion of a Revelation from God) as false. And does such a conduct tend to promote the purposes of the Gospel in the world, or to give it greater power to improve the minds, or reform the lives of men? It cannot with any reason be presumed. The Doctrines referred to, have an immediate and direct influence upon *Practice*; they are distinguishing parts of the Gospel method of restoring men to God, and intended to strengthen all the obligations to obedience. They represent our relation to God as more *near* and *engaging*; our dependance upon him as more *constant* and *beneficial*; and our access to him as more *encouraging*; and consequently they are

are all directly suited to establish a most delightful intercourse between him and our minds. And what is this, but the most powerful spring of those affections to our God and Redeemer, which must keep alive the piety, and establish the virtue of Christians? And can the disparagement of such truths conduce to the general advancement of Religion? The contrary may be justly expected from it. To exclude them, is to take away some of the most affecting engagements to the love and obedience of God; and they, who *do and teach men so*, it is to be feared, enfeeble the best hold upon their virtue, and of consequence, though *unwarily*, become *partakers of their sins*.

A liberty of enquiry and of private judgment is the natural right of every man; and Christianity is so far from abridging it, that it recommends and applauds the free use of it. But a liberty of *modelling* a Divine Revelation according to pleasure, is what no reasonable man would wish to lay claim to, nor can he justify himself to God or the world for assuming it. Let no Christian fear for the Gospel, or any of its Doctrines, so far as to be tempted to this conduct with a view either to justify or recommend it. It needs not any such concessions; nor will it ever gain any advantage by them. It's evidence, after having been tried *as by fire*, has come forth like *gold*, still *brighter and more weighty*; and it's Doctrines have appeared more *worthy of all acceptance*, as they have been more closely examined; every way agreeable to the nature and perfections of God, and suited to the state and necessities of men; so that they need nothing more to recommend them to any good mind, than to be *considered*. And even those which have been thought most *exceptionable*, (like some parts of the natural world,

world, which at first sight have appeared less harmonious or useful,) upon further search, have been discovered to be it's greatest excellencies, and to contain most admirable exertions of divine wisdom and goodness.—A modest caution in all cases, becomes wise and good men; but in none more than in the judgment they form, and the assertions they lay down concerning the divine proceedings; least *haply*, by taking an undue freedom with them, *they be found even to fight against God*. And they should consider too the advantage which persons of bad dispositions will probably take from their method of treating Revelation, to encourage themselves in the neglect of it's most important rules of life. If this liberty be allowable in judging of the truth of it's *Doctrines*, why not, of the goodness of it's *Morals*? If the *former* are to be brought to the test of *human* apprehensions concerning the fitness of things, and to be rejected if they agree not with them, why (will they say) may not the *latter* be tried by the rule of natural appetite, of present interest and convenience, and be rejected in those instances wherein they thwart or oppose it? Why may not we choose for ourselves what we will *obey*, as well as others what they will *believe*? It is well, if this inference has not been sometimes made.—And what effect it must have upon the purity of mens morals may be easily imagined.—This dangerous affectation of an over-refinement of the Gospel has contributed (it is to be feared) not a little to another evil of great prejudice to the general power of Religion amongst us, and that is,

2. *A visible decay in Spirituality*. By *Spirituality* I do not mean an useless, unimproving Enthusiasm, which helps neither to better the heart, nor

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to mend the life ; but such a deep and serious impression of spiritual and eternal objects, as is wrought into the heart by an habitual persuasion of the reality and importance of them, and which has a direct and immediate tendency to purify and adorn the christian character. The Religion of Jesus is suited to form the minds of men to this disposition, it's discoveries, it's promises, it's prospects and hopes all lead to it ; and it is what *He*, our great Master, repeatedly inculcates upon his followers, as most essential to a right and useful conduct in the world. And whoever considers it's extensive influence, must acknowledge the great importance of it in the character of such, both towards supporting their own virtue, and promoting Religion in others. For it is by a lively, abiding apprehension of things spiritual and future, that a Christian acquires such a rational firmness of spirit amidst all worldly concerns, as prevents his being enslaved to any mean and unworthy passion. And that which makes him good in himself, makes him good and useful in the world ; his life more exemplary, and his whole conversation more edifying, and such as shall convey a favour of Religion amongst all around him. On the contrary, a *declension* herein must be proportionably injurious to the cause of piety ; and the indications of such a declension are surely but too visible amongst us.

And may we not too justly ascribe it to this cause, that so many Christians have been tempted to reduce the whole of Religion to what may properly enough be stiled *meer Morality*, and to encourage in themselves and others a delusive attempt of reconciling a life of pleasure and vanity with the purity of the Gospel profession?

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The consequence of which has been, that the power of Religion in general has declined both in their own hearts, and in the regards of those that were influenced by their examples. For, whatever respect men may pretend to pay to the social virtues, as if all goodness was contained in them only, and as if a natural probity of mind and sense of honour were sufficient to secure the practice of them, it is certain, that when once the foundation of piety is destroyed, every thing else that is good, is in imminent danger of sinking soon into the ruins of it. Experience fully shews the feebleness of all other supports, when this is gone, and with what uncertainty other considerations operate without its assistance.

And how much has this unhappy decay of Spirituality in good men, contributed to promote that high taste for pleasure and amusement, which now so generally prevails, and which has had such a fatal influence upon the corruption of our manners! Where this increases, Religion and sobriety must decline, and indeed usually sink into contempt. And how can it be more effectually kept in countenance, than by the examples of those who should restrain it? If persons of general esteem for goodness grow vain and trifling, others will soon grow licentious; if they appear, notwithstanding their profession, to be really *lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God*, no wonder that others, who will be glad at their follies, to countenance their own, grow *abominable and disobedient, to every good work reprobate*. That which naturally follows upon a decay in piety is,

3. *A low opinion of religious Institutions.* An evil but too common, and which has spread itself more generally amongst us from the countenance it
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has received by the example of many, whose characters in other respects have been unexceptionable. The pernicious effects of it, and its bad influence upon the morals of society, may be easily discerned from what I just now suggested, which was, the near connection there is between a sense of piety and the practice of virtue. If the latter be ever well supported, it must be by the aids it receives from the former. Unless virtue be found in conjunction with piety, it rests upon too weak a foundation to withstand the assaults of interest, pleasure, or passion. To weaken this hold upon the minds of men, is to weaken the most powerful ties and obligations to virtue, and secretly to enfeeble the surest restraints of licentiousness.

Now if a sense of piety be kept up amongst men, it must be by a proper regard to, and attendance on the Institutions of Religion; such as the publick worship of God, publick instruction, and other employments of the Sanctuary; for these are the means, which the wisdom of God has appointed, and which his Providence leads to, in order to that end. But if men are *taught* to think lightly of them, how can it be imagined, but that their benefit and good purpose will be obstructed? They will be either not attended, or if they are, will be but little regarded; the effect of which, as observation shews us, must be an unrestrained dissoluteness and irreligion.

And will not men be naturally led into this profane negligence, if they observe, that persons, otherwise of understanding and of professed sobriety, decline in *their* regards to these Solemnities? If they hear *them* speak of them with a visible slight, perhaps sometimes with a *secret sneer*, they will be ready enough to conclude at once,

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that they are little better than useless insignificant things. If they observe, that *such* persons grow remiss in their attendance upon them, and exercise no care, that either themselves or others may improve by them, it will be natural for them, without scruple, to run into the common neglect of the Sabbath, and by degrees to despise every thing sacred. These effects will but too naturally follow from such a conduct in persons of character and discernment, whose opinion the unexperienced and careless are willing enough to build upon, when it favours any irreligious propensities in themselves. One would not charge the growing neglect of publick worship, which of late has been so visible amongst us, *wholly* to this cause; but in many instances it hath undoubtedly contributed to it. And surely when it is considered how great an inlet to all vice and corruption the profanation of the Sabbath is, one would willingly hope that good men would not wish to be *in the least* accessory to a thing so pernicious. And it is certainly worthy of their reflection, that as their own worth or piety is not likely to gain any advantage from so indiscreet a behaviour, so the worth and piety of many, who are likely to be influenced by them, are in danger of being totally ruined, or at least, of being much obstructed by means of it. This unbecoming conduct is often attended by another thing of no small disservice to National Piety, and that is falling in with,

4. *A fashionable contempt of the Ministers of Religion* Generally speaking, it is true, personal respect will follow personal merit, and rise or fall in proportion to it. And where this is wanting, no outward character whatever can give a right or claim to it. Nay, the more eminent and respectable

spectable the profession is, by which a man is distinguished, the greater contempt will he fall under, if his abilities for it, or behaviour in it, fall short of what might be expected. And for this reason no character is more despicable and mean than that of an ignorant or vicious Preacher of the Gospel. No man must expect to derive dignity from his office who does not bring dignity to it.

And in this case he must not think it hard, if the world denies him that respect which his rank in life may seem to entitle him to.

But I am not speaking of *personal* respect, which they who are most anxious about, are usually the least deserving of, but of that which for the good of Religion ought to be shewn towards those, whose office it is to promote and advance it in the world. And certainly, though it be true, that a *bad* man can derive no honour from it, it is no just inference from thence, that therefore a *good* man should be despised upon the account of it. And yet one would think this was sometimes thought reasonable; and that a person forfeits all right to the ordinary regards due to men of equal worth, meerly because he belongs to it.

That this should be expressed by the *enemies* of Religion is not strange, and that they should be glad to take occasion from the unworthiness of a *few*, to disparage a cause, which must ever be a reproach to themselves. The Duties of the Ministry, when rightly performed, throw too strong a light upon *them* and their actions to be pleasing; and as this is painful and insupportable to them, it is no mean policy to endeavour to turn off the attention of the world from thence, by setting up those as the objects of contempt and ridicule who create them so much inward uneasiness. But

one would not expect any thing of this kind from the *friends* of Religion. For, though it be a thing fashionable, and sometimes considered as an argument of superior wit and understanding, yet, did they but consider its evil effects, and how much the cause of Religion will *probably* suffer by it, especially when it comes from them, one would hope, they should rather choose to be content with the plainer character of solid goodness and wisdom, than to aspire to any other by such unworthy means. It should be considered as one reason against it, that hereby an order of men, many of whom, at least, must be allowed to be not the most inconsiderable friends and ornaments to society, are injured in their deserved esteem; but there is another of still greater weight, which is, that the valuable and most important designs of their office, no less than the reformation and improvement, and best happiness of mankind, and without which all sense of Religion must be soon worn out of the world, must be greatly obstructed thereby. From the *multitude* who are chiefly influenced by the sentiments of their superiors, no other can be expected; for there is no great probability, that men will hear with much respect, or receive any great advantage from persons, whom they have been *taught* before-hand to despise. And is not this to be *partakers of other mens sins*? Perhaps a still more prevailing instance of this kind is,

5. *The want of religious order and wise government in Families.* A thing but too common even amongst many persons otherwise of worthy and good characters. It is from these private societies that the publick interest looks for its support. And as the spirit and manners of those, who are the heads of them, in a great measure govern

govern the taste and form the character of the rising age, hence appears the importance of discreet management and good order there. For most persons receive in that situation those impressions, sentiments and habits whereby they are usually influenced in the future scenes of life. So that the dispositions and practices they carry with them from thence, whether good or bad, religious or profane, are such as must gradually diffuse themselves in the world at large, either to the advantage or to the mischief of Religion in society. The well-ordered families of good men are *nurseries of virtue*. But is a proper care generally taken to render them so? Does that good order and wise regulation prevail in many, which tends to it? Let every one look at home.

Doubtless, an exemplary conduct, a restraint upon licentiousness and disorders amongst inferiors, an absolute discountenance of all profaneness, having children and servants in all sobriety, the regular worship and acknowledgment of God, prudent hints and intimations, as occasion offers, recommended with compassion and kindness, are things that may be expected in the houses of Christians; and their good tendency cannot be questioned. Were they but *generally* practised, they could not but have a considerable influence towards the reformation of the world. And must not the neglect of such pious and wise order be equally prejudicial? If these things are hardly ever known or heard of, where it might be expected they should be constantly visible, there is not only a most valuable opportunity of promoting Religion lost, but many must be sent out into the world under the worst prejudice against it, *viz.* that it is itself nothing more than meer empty shew and pretence; because

cause they observe that they, who are called *religious*, whatever appearance of it they make in publick, are in private life as easie about it as other men.—And this naturally leads me to take notice of another, but too fruitful source of Irreligion from the same quarter, and that is,

6. *A neglect of proper and pious care in Education.* Indiscretions in this particular, it is true, are usually numerous enough, and they are more easily reckoned up than rectified. All that I have any concern to speak of, are such as have a visible effect upon the christian character, and they are briefly these two. The *one* is, an immoderate concern about external accomplishments, to the neglect of those that are more valuable. And the *other* is, an unconstrained indulgence of passion and inclination; both which naturally lead either to meer vanity and indolence, or, which is worse, to irreligion and wickedness in after-life. By the *one*, young persons are insensibly inured to look upon an advantageous appearance in the gayer scenes of the world, (into which they are usually but too early introduced) as the most important of all attainments; and this, together with that superficial knowledge, which may be collected from ordinary conversation, they are accordingly ready to satisfy themselves with, as a very sufficient furniture both for mind and body. Hereby an high taste for pleasure, that most *destructive passion*, is early imbibed, and takes up the whole heart; and all just sentiments, solid acquirements, worthy views in life, are considered as heavy, unpleasing things, and the thoughts of them discarded with disgust. By this unhappy mistake we see many, whose natural abilities, under proper culture and direction, would have rendered them useful members of society,

society, and a support and honour to Religion and their Country, so trained up as to be really useless to either; perhaps *worse* than useless, the prey of every vain passion, and a burden and disgrace to the world. The structure is indeed outwardly beautiful, ornamented and showy, but indwardly destitute of furniture and use, the habitation of airy imaginations, and fantastick follies; it may be, *the cage of every unclean and hateful bird.*

The other, namely, the unrestrained indulgence of passion and inclination, is perhaps still more fatal. For what can be expected from any one, whose spirit has always been unaccustomed to restraint or self-denial? But an utter impatience of both, a confident insolence of mind, a notion of self-sufficiency, ungoverned passions, and a contempt of reason and of all authority. The first effect of this error is usually, that such despise their Parents; and when they have lost a proper respect for them, it is not likely they will long regard any body else, who would direct them for their good. And can this be thought a proper foundation, for that submission of the will to reason, that profound obedience of heart to the laws of God, which is the ground and essence of virtue and Religion? And what appearance are they, who come out into the world from under such tuition, likely to make, either as encouragers of piety and good morals, or as friends to their Country? *Through high-swelling words of vanity* they may indeed for a while deceive others, but where there is nothing solidly good in a man's own mind, generally speaking, society has but little good to expect from him. He may affect to appear a patron of Liberty, and promise it to others, but nothing uniformly

uniformly valuable can result from thence, *seeing he himself is the servant of corruption.*

The effects of this culpable neglect are never seen in so full and just a light, as when compared with the happy fruits of a wiser and more attentive conduct amongst Christians of greater prudence and piety. We behold *their* families with delight, as no other than *seminaries* of good sense and of wisdom, and where those seeds of piety and goodness are sown, which the world afterwards largely reaps the advantageous fruits of; where tender minds are in every engaging method formed to truth, self-government and Religion; and from whence those are sent out into society, who prove the best ornaments and blessings of it. The world is not a little indebted to the discretion and timely prudence of such Christians. They are justly esteemed the most valuable friends of Religion and of their Country, and worthy of distinguished honour. I *must* mention one thing more, which, in some persons of character, has considerably tended to weaken the restraints upon National Irreligion, and that is,

7. *A false Modesty.* By this I mean a want of courage to appear upon proper occasions in the cause of virtue and piety; and a seeming compliance with the vain and corrupt taste of others. This error has not always been the prevailing fault of good men. There was a time when Religion was made to appear almost in every thing. To avoid this extreme, which brought on, in some cases, but too justly the imputation of hypocrisy, many have been carried into another, of affecting a secret slight of it, and of carefully avoiding the least appearance of regard to it, even where the occasion *naturally* calls upon them

them to appear in it's defence. So that they have fallen into a different species of hypocrisy, not of seeming *more* pious, but *far less* so than they really are. By this means the reputation and esteem of Religion is, *at times*, greatly injured. For from hence the cause of vice and profane folly has often triumphed, where it might have received a just rebuke; Religion has been regarded as a matter, which had no solid ground for it's support; and many have been tempted to look upon it as a mean unmanly thing which persons of sense and taste were really ashamed of. Though an *indiscreet* and *untimely* shew of piety be indeed no way commendable, but is rather an argument of weakness, or ostentation, or design, yet certainly there *are* seasons and occasions, when it is so far from being imprudent or unbecoming, that it is the *duty* of a Christian to appear in honour of it; and when his resolution *should* discover itself, either in giving a proper check to profane folly, or in vindicating the cause of injured Religion.—A cause which will bear the best vindication, and which no man has any reason to be ashamed of, but he who is conscious of being a shame *to* it. Others may have been inflexible in trifles; but the fear of this will never justify us in an error more dangerous, namely, being indifferent and yielding in matters of *solid importance*. By such mean compliances Religion itself must suffer, and the esteem and power of it be proportionably endangered in the world.

The things I have now laid before you contain some of the chief instances of *blameable indiscretion, mistake, or neglect*, whereby we have reason to fear many good men amongst us have become *partakers of other mens sins*; whereby they

have either unhappily contributed to the National Irreligion, or lessened their influence towards the reformation of it. Whoever attends to them with seriousness, or pursues them into their natural consequences, must discern their evil effects in both these particulars; and, of course, how much the amendment of them must help towards our recovery. Every good man must be grieved to see that the Corruption and Irreligion of the Nation, should have acquired so great an accession out of that quarter, from whence should have come it's greatest restraint and discouragement. But if it *be* so, it was high time we discerned it, and lamented it, and betook ourselves to a more religious caution and wisdom.

The wickedness of the world is not to be removed by meer declamation, nor by lively descriptions of it's enormity and danger, nor by applying only to it's more flagrant discoveries and symptoms. If we would root out or suppress the *disease*, we must trace it up to it's *original*, and strike at it's first *seeds* and *principles*; and if they can be destroyed, the other, though painful and threatening for a while, will in time abate and die away of themselves. Till this be done, it is not to be expected, that the constitution should acquire any lasting strength and firmness.

In enquiring into, and laying open the *maldy*, we are now considering, it is a great advantage, that we are speaking to those, who have it both in their *power* and *inclination* to remedy it. The grossly depraved are usually too much hardened to be impressed; and the obstinate and prejudiced often will *cherish* their disease, when we would use our best pains to assist them in the *cure* of it. It is our *duty* to apply to such, if
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peradventure God will give them repentance unto salvation, though success is all the while but unpromising. But when we apply to persons of thought and understanding, of ingenuity and worth, the prospect becomes far more encouraging: they will need no apology for the honest freedom which those, who are friends to Religion together with themselves, use upon so important a subject. And though it should give some uneasie reflections for the present, yet even those reflections themselves will operate kindly with other considerations, to quicken their zeal and care in curing the evil complained of. If *any* persons engage with a due concern and seriousness in such Solemnities as this, it may be presumed *good men* do; and certainly we cannot answer the ends of them in a manner more acceptable to God, or more beneficial to our Country, than by entering faithfully on the most effectual means of suppressing the power of Vice and Irreligion amongst us. I will exercise your patience no longer, than while I briefly remind you,

III. *Of the many and weighty Considerations, which should engage us to the more faithful observance of this important rule of conduct.* As

I. *The glory of God.* A motive and principle of action the most noble and excellent that can awaken the human soul, and which every generous and well formed mind must readily feel the impressions of. The glory of God is the advancement of his kingdom of righteousness, virtue and purity, in the world; the suitable acknowledgement of his perfections and government, of his authority and grace amongst mankind. And how truly great and worthy a part do they bear

in the creation, who exert themselves in promoting such a design; who have a zeal that the great Father and Lord of the Universe, who continually showers down good amongst his creatures, may be suitably honoured by them; and who improve their respective influence in encouraging obedience to those laws, which he has given for the improvement and perfection of rational creatures, and to establish order and happiness through his works?

To advance this glorious design he sent his *own Son* into this world. And from whom may a proper concern to promote and carry it on, be expected, if not from the servants of God, and the professed disciples of his Son? If his Glory *be* supported in the societies of men, it must be by *their* means. These were the instruments which in every age God made use of, to sustain his cause, and to prevent the world from running into a *total* corruption of manners. And surely one would think that a *low* degree of zeal for God, was sufficient to guard such persons against those instances of conduct which tend to dishonour him. It might be presumed indeed, that hardly any good man would be content to express merely this *negative* kind of piety towards him. The more *eminent* degrees of this sacred passion, it is our duty as Christians to cultivate; and these doubtless will put us upon active endeavours that all around us, *may glorify our Father who is in heaven.*

2. *The present welfare and future happiness of mankind.* This lies in close connection with the glory of God; but may be considered as a distinct and most engaging argument with every good man to study the advancement of Religion. He can be no friend to human kind who wishes not to see

see them wise and virtuous; for by no other means can they be truly happy. And how can we be said to wish that, which we are careless whether we obstruct or no; which we will not exercise a little attention, or self-denial, or resolution to promote? It was to redeem men from their sins, that Christ died. So great was his Charity to them! So wisely was it pointed! And shall they who profess to be his members, be so wholly void of the like generous affection, as to destroy, by their neglect, any for whom Christ died? To do this by design would be the highest impiety and cruelty; so to do it through the omission of an *easy, natural, proper* care, is at least an argument of great defect in goodness and charity.

And methinks I might recommend this matter to you with peculiar advantage from this topick of Charity, in an age so remarkably distinguished by the exercise of that generous virtue. Never did a noble tenderness to the distresses of others appear more visible, or abound more in it's proper fruits, perhaps in *any* nation or time, than our *own*. So that one would hope we might be the more easily prevailed upon to follow it in it's further and still more valuable discoveries. For can we pretend to have compassion for the bodies of men, and none for their souls? Shall we bestir ourselves to relieve their present distresses, and do nothing to deliver them from their vices, or to prevent their falling under the dreadful consequences of them? Are we ready to contribute to their temporal good, and shall we have no regard to their happiness for ever? Nor concern ourselves whether we advance or hinder it, by the *necessary influence* which our conduct, one way or other, *must* have upon it? Surely consistent Charity;

Charity; Charity founded in *nature* indeed, but conducted by reason, principle, and conscience, should not fail to discover itself in these more important purposes of good to our fellow-creatures. Then are we their *true* patrons and friends, when our Charity to them takes in the whole compass of their happiness within it's reach.

3. *The welfare of posterity and of our Country.* Besides those around us, whom we cannot look upon and consider without the *tenderest* emotions of nature, and whose well doing must therefore lie near our hearts, we are led, by a natural affection to our kind, to wish the whole rising generation the enjoyments of future peace and safety in society; that they all may possess the blessings of *free Britons*, and be a support to Religion, after our own intercourse with the world shall be broken off for ever. And can we possibly contribute better to this desirable purpose, than by our faithful endeavours to leave them under the impressions of rational piety, and formed to the love and habits of virtue? Certainly we cannot leave a better *Legacy* to the community, we once belonged to, than such persons who, by diffusing a sense of Religion amongst others, in their day, shall lay and perpetuate the most solid groundwork of it's happiness.

And in every time of publick difficulty and danger (such as *this* is) what method can we take so effectually to secure the favourable aspects of Providence, as resolving each of us in our several stations, to enter without delay upon this pious work? Our Country now calls for *every* thing we can do for it. And if we can obtain *an interest in God*, we lay the best foundation of it's security; for *happy is that people whose God is the Lord*. For this purpose we now humble our
selves

selves in his presence, acknowledge our former sins and omissions, and implore, with united supplications, his forgiveness and blessing. *But bath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.* The most solemn and pompous services, without obedience or reformation, are no better than profane mockery in his sight. It is true, past omissions cannot be recalled; but perhaps their effects may yet in *some measure* be remedied. We may be more zealous, more faithful, more watchful to improve occasions, and to employ our influence in advancing the honour of God, and the power of Religion. And if we have *any meaning* in this Solemnity, it is, that we engage ourselves so to be and to do. And how can we enter into such an engagement, without resolving to pursue it in those ways, which Providence and our respective circumstances in life point out to us? By a sincere active diligence herein we shall discover a true love to our Country, and shall most successfully baffle the power and artifice of our enemies. For that God, whom we thus honour, will not fail to distinguish us by the tokens of his presence, and with the favourable displays of his power. He will ever befriend our interests, and enable us *to tread down under our feet, those that rise up against us.*

The effects of such a worthy, religious industry amongst good men in their several stations, shall open to our prospect a scene most desirable and joyous. A scene, wherein peace and liberty, virtue and good order shall reign with uncontrolled sway, and shed abroad their gracious light and influences through this happy Isle. A scene, unclouded by threatenings
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from abroad, and undisturbed by intestine commotions; and from whence, *destructive war*, with all it's hideous train of mischiefs, shall be banished for ever; or, in the beautiful expression of the Psalmist, wherein *mercy and truth shall meet together, righteousness and peace shall kiss each other; truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven. Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good.*

To conclude—Let all of us bring this matter home seriously to our own hearts, by attending to the future consequences of observing or neglecting this important admonition in regard to *ourselves*. There is a season coming on, when each of us shall more narrowly survey the *minuter* parts of our conduct than we do now, and when our reflections thereupon will be more serious.—And amongst others, no doubt, those which related to our influence in the world, whereby we have either promoted the virtue and happiness of it, or increased it's corruption and misery, will be reviewed. In that hour it must be a great addition to our comfort, to think we had any ways advanced the honour of God and the interest of mankind, or had endeavoured to do it. But if we have the *hearts of Christians* then left us, it must give us unspeakable trouble to reflect, that Religion and the souls of others had suffered by our means, though it were through *neglect* or *indiscretion* only. Nay, though we should then have *good hope, through grace*, of the pardon of our *own sins*, the remembrance of *their sins*, of which we had been *partakers*, must considerably lessen the comfort of that pardon, and wound us with distress and shame. We must then consider the evil we have done in this respect, as a mischief we can *never remedy*,
which

which we can *never atone* for, and which others may probably *suffer eternally* the sad effects of. A thought most affecting and grievous to any serious spirit! And at such a season *every one* will be serious. And as in *this* world such guilty negligence shall be a great diminution of our *comfort*, so in the other of our *reward*. For if the recompence of those, *who turn many to righteousness*, shall be more illustrious than that of other good men, theirs, without question, must be proportionably lessened, who, on the contrary, (though through *meer imprudence*) were accessory to the *sins of many*. To attend duly to these consequences, (which perhaps may not be very distant from *some of us*) should methinks awaken us to that active care and fidelity in this matter, which will bear a calm and peaceful review at last. May we and all the servants of God acquit ourselves herein, as becomes those who have a true zeal for HIS HONOUR, and a consistent love to MANKIND and THEIR COUNTRY. *Amen.*

T H E E N D.

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